

Island Mentality: Mapping “de globality ov it all” between Jamaica, England, and Australia in Maxine Beneba Clarke’s “Big Islan”

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“... islands, large or small, are indeed in some sense self-contained, worlds unto themselves. But the very sea that insulates and isolates – two verbs with a common root but crucially different meanings – is also the medium that connects one island to every other island, and archipelagoes to continents.” –Nicholas Laughlin, *So Many Islands*

“Big Islan” and the Pedagogical Imperative

In Maxine Beneba Clarke’s short story “Big Islan,” set in 1960s Kingston, Jamaica, Clarise is teaching her husband Nathaniel Robinson to read. Nathaniel did not reveal he was illiterate until after they were married. Yet, as he grumbles in the face of his wife’s demands that he rectify this, “it nat only imself dat was cookin up de porkies fore dem wed” (177). Clarise also had a secret: she was not a virgin. Through this humour, irony and patois-inflected narration, Clarke’s story, which is drawn from her collection *Foreign Soil* (2014), explores the politics of language, colonialism and globalisation through an unexpected historical lens. Though the story never leaves Jamaica, historical allusions and references also prompt readers to think beyond the text – and beyond the nation – to question discourses of nationalism, multiculturalism, and assimilation in countries of the Global North.

Clarise insists that Nathaniel learn to read so that he can get a better job and they can migrate to Britain, following in the wake of the Windrush generation. If they stay in a “small-tiny” place like Jamaica, she argues, “den small is de only ting our likkle minds evah gwan be” (181). Nathaniel’s horizons are certainly expanded in “Big Islan,” but in unexpected ways. Education in the story proves its ambivalent, decolonising potential, as both submission to the coloniser’s system and new means to subvert it. In fact, education, I argue, is both a theme and a narrative strategy in “Big Islan.” As Clarise educates Nathaniel – and Nathaniel begins to teach himself – the story also teaches its readers. Through its title and its repeated references to maps, “Big Islan” charts unexpected connections between islands, big and small. In doing so the story draws attention to what Nathaniel calls “de globality ov it all,” and invites readers to question the meaning of insularity and an island mentality when it comes to belonging (181).

This invitation is what Elena Machado Sáez in *Market Aesthetics* (2015) calls the “pedagogical imperative” of historical fiction by Caribbean diasporic writers (3). Authors like Andrea Levy, Junot Díaz, Marlon James and Edwidge Danticat, among others, are driven to counter the decontextualized discourses of globalisation and multiculturalism in the Global North that erase how they and their communities arrived there (12). They restore histories that have been marginalised or intentionally suppressed – often because they expose imperial interventions that drove Caribbean peoples to migrate in the first place. By imagining migrants before they leave home, poised on the edge of a great leap, “Big Islan” fills in the gaps left blank by multiculturalist discourses in countries like the U.K. and Australia which expect migrants to start from scratch, make themselves anew, and assimilate into the melting pot. But as I explore, it also leaves some gaps open, inviting readers to take an active responsibility in what E. Kamau Brathwaite calls the “total expression” of Caribbean oral story-telling traditions (312).

Despite the innovations of these texts, Machado Sáez notes that the pedagogical imperative tends to be portrayed as not-literary. That is, the drive to create postcolonial counternarratives and restore lost histories is often perceived by reviewers and the literary market more broadly as too preachy, political or didactic, diminishing its literary appeal (3). However as Machado Sáez also notes, writers themselves are aware of this delicate balance between market demands and their ethical drive, as well as their position in-between. Consequently, they intentionally draw attention to how globalisation both “open[s] and clos[es] avenues for circulating a postcolonial politics of narrating history” (3). In the story, Nathaniel, as this essay will demonstrate, embodies precisely this precarious position between globalisation and globality.

Language, for Clarke, is a crucial way to underscore such ambivalence. Her innovative style, which replicates Jamaican speech, defies the charge of lacking aesthetic or literary appeal. Moreover, her strategies of drawing readers into an active, critical relationship with the text are subtle rather than didactic. This article examines three colonial institutions – the English language, map-making, and cricket – that “Big Islan” explores for their subversive yet ambivalent potential. In all cases, Nathaniel learns something that reframes his perception of the world. As I argue, Clarke’s readers do too – if they are willing to accept the story’s invitation to read beyond the text.

Language, Colonisation, Resistance

From its opening pages, *Foreign Soil* declares its fundamental interest in language, with an epigraph from Chinua Achebe: “Let no one be fooled by the fact that we may write in English, for we intend to do unheard of things with it.” Though “Big Islan” is set in the 1960s, Clarke is invested in what these words mean for transnational, diasporic stories, beyond the locally grounded nationalisms that often

characterised postcolonial debates of Achebe's generation. Her narrative language transforms as the collection's stories jump between Brixton, New Orleans, Melbourne, Kampala, Kingston, and an immigration detention centre in Sydney, voicing a global community for whom the question is not whether to write in English, the language of globalisation, but what to do with it. For Clarke, as I explore, the emphasis in Achebe's words lies not only in the fact "that we may write in *English*" but that "we may *write* in English" [emphasis mine] – "Big Islan" continually foregrounds the tension between oral traditions and written language.

The story reveals the ambivalent potential inherent in colonial Caribbean subjects learning written, standard English. For Frantz Fanon, mastering the colonial language represents freedom and power because it means appropriating the culture of the coloniser. "A man who possesses a language," he writes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, "possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this language" (2). Beyond syntax and grammar, mastering the coloniser's tongue "means above all assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization" (2). For Fanon, to speak "correctly" is therefore a potent way to challenge the coloniser's assumptions of superiority (19). This logic drives Clarise; "obsess wid educatin im. Obsess wid de more money she seh it gwan bring," she sees the material gains and social power of mastering standard British English (Clarke 176).

Yet the "weight of a civilization" that Fanon identifies also proves a heavy, and in Nathaniel's case, unwanted burden. Colonial education is imposed on Nathaniel, by Clarise and more importantly by a colonial system that positions every young, able-bodied Jamaican man as a "prisoner on his island, lost in an atmosphere without the slightest prospect, feel[ing] the call of Europe like a breath of fresh air" (Fanon 5). In fact, Nathaniel has been deeply satisfied with his life at home in Kingston. Colonial education for him begins a truly "unsettling" process, fostering a sense of both unease and displacement, as standard English begins to come between Nathaniel and his Caribbean reality.

Standing at Kingston Port, "on de edge ov dis beloved islan country-a his, look-lookin out te sea" he sees his familiar and eternal home: "Same blue pon green pon navy pon khaki water. Same flat-flat horizon line dat seem like it stretchin way-way beyon wat im eye can si, runnin an runnin forever an a day. Same familiar husky whisper-a de sea breeze [...] Same-same Kingston" (173–74). Yet something niggles: "Since *J fe Jamaica*" – that is, since Clarise started teaching him to read – "everytin aroun Nathaniel seem like it nyah quite de same [...] Evah since *J fe Jamaica*, much as im continue te tell himself nuttin change, Nathaniel carry nyah small amount-a unease deep deep down in im own self skin" (174–75; italics in original). If naming reality is a colonial tool used to exert power over it (Ashcroft *et al.* 283; Kincaid), "Big Islan" shows how this power inhabits the colonised subject, displacing Nathaniel within his own skin.

The dissonance derives from perceptual models of colonial education that jar with Caribbean reality and are inadequate, as E.

Kamau Brathwaite argues in his essay “Nation Language,” to represent colonised peoples’ experience. As Brathwaite memorably writes, such education equips them with the “syllabic intelligence” to describe snowfall, but not a hurricane (310). Learning one letter per week at Clarise’s insistence, Nathaniel starts with “A fe ackee,” a capital letter whose sharp appearance when traced – “pointy at de top, like it some kinda arrow” – contradicts the tactile sensuality of Clarise preparing the Caribbean staple it refers to: “her fingers removin de blushin-crimson flower frum outside-a de ackee, snappin off de cedar-black seed at de end-a de cream-colour fruit” (175). *A fe ackee* also initiates Nathaniel’s humiliation, when at the supermarket Clarise makes him identify all the As on the packages, each “word-a praise like an open-palm slap on de back of Nathaniel head” (177). This learning process does not introduce Nathaniel to a sense of power, as Fanon envisions, but instead to fatigue, embarrassment, dissatisfaction, and the drive for mastery. The story prompts the question: does Nathaniel possess the colonial language, or does it possess him?

In fact, even as it poses this question, “Big Islan” gives Nathaniel the “last word” by foregrounding the sounds and rhythms of his tongue. Ignoring the noise of language, for Brathwaite, means losing meaning (311). The importance of sound to Clarke, whose own career was notably forged in spoken-word poetry (Gunew 108), is evident in her playfulness with repetitions, doublings, and non-standard spelling, giving both an aesthetic and political thrust to her innovative evocations of Jamaican language. Though the standard British English lesson occupies a central and unsettling position in the story, it is a Jamaican voice that envelops it. The discrepancy between the “E” and “I” in “*E is fe Ingran*,” for example, not only preserves Jamaican speech patterns but suggests the imperfect fit of written, British language to how people, especially colonised subjects, experience reality (Clarke 182).

Brathwaite sees this experimentation as fundamental in representing the uniqueness of Caribbean reality, through “nation language.” Born in the Caribbean from oral traditions and submerged in the African diasporic experience, nation language is not a dialect or a caricature; though lexically English, “in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions,” it pushes English beyond itself (311). Fanon, in contrast, views this kind of language – what he calls “pidgin” – as a limitation pinning the Caribbean Black man to toxic stereotypes, “imprisoning him as the eternal victim of his own essence, of a *visible appearance* for which he is not responsible” (18; italics in original). Rather than educating those who view Black people in such a way, Fanon emphasises “teaching the black man [sic] not to be a slave of their archetypes” (18). Language is thus a crucial aspect of liberation for Fanon, for whom “to speak pidgin means: ‘You, stay where you are’” (17).

In this light, the story’s patois-inflected narration, together with Nathaniel’s desire precisely to “stay where he is,” represents not only a subversive, anti-imperialist stance, but also a challenge to homegrown dismissals of Caribbean language. In her incessant chase for “bettah

ting,” Clarise speaks the language of mastery and possession, “talkin like dat Kennedy on de wireless, whose government jus teyk office in America, cross de sea” and who immediately announced plans to put man on the moon (184; 182). Nathaniel, meanwhile, believes the colonising desire “te go always a-seekin-seekin” invites trouble (183). The text instead repeatedly focalises the place Nathaniel calls home, through his reveries on the exact colour and quality of the harbour water, articulated with the rhythm and richness of Jamaican speech: “aquamarine meet cobalt, cobalt greet turquoise, an turquoise got itself all busy-up hailin good afternoon te de jadest ov greens” (183–84). By giving voice to Nathaniel and his experience of his beloved island, the text bypasses stereotypes based on his own “*visible appearance*” in order to explore Caribbean reality through his eyes, ears and tongue (Fanon 18; italics in original). Readers meet Nathaniel on his terms; on his turf.

Living Globality: Remapping the World

Nathaniel’s contentment and sense of place offer another radical counternarrative to globalisation and imperialism, by daring to reorganise the world order around his Kingston home. While other young men, including his brother Curtis, have been swept up in the “scramble te get in line” to migrate to England, Nathaniel remains defiant in his love for his island and in the knowledge that, despite the globalising forces compelling him to go, “[i]m nyah crazy fe wantin te stay” (182; 184). Not just a happy resident of Kingston, Jamaica; Nathaniel already views himself as a citizen of a global community in which this supposedly peripheral place plays a central role. With Clarise insisting they migrate to the Global North, Nathaniel dares to upend this framing entirely, placing himself and his job at Kingston Port at “de centre ov everytin comin an gwan te dis island” (181). As he explains to Clarise, “Feel like mi know de workins ov de world wen mi at de port. Ye know, like mi own self is part ov de globality ov it all” (181).

While Clarise is quick to correct her husband that globality is “nyah even a word” (181), this merely underlines, again, the ways Caribbean experience exceeds standard British English. Globality is a term coined by Édouard Glissant—in French, he writes *globalité* or *mondialité*—as an alternative to Globalisation (*Globalisation/ Mondialisation*). As an expression of Glissant’s broader theory of Relation, globality describes a kind of “planetary consciousness” (Bongie 93). In contrast to globalisation, however, the planetary connectedness that Glissant imagines throughout his oeuvre is one that resists universalising global systems to instead celebrate, as J. Michael Dash writes, “the ungraspable specificity of a world in which all elementary particles [are] interrelated” (Dash 673). Unlike the oppressive forces of globalisation that impose interconnectedness as a homogenising, top-down order, globality instead promotes and embraces the local, unique, and specific and thus maintains diversity

through difference. Linguistic and cultural creolization in the Caribbean are central to this vision. So, too, is place: as many small islands scattered in the sea, Caribbean geography gives birth to this theory; Glissant writes in *Poetics of Relation* (1990) that “the reality of archipelagos in the Caribbean or the Pacific provides a natural illustration of the thought of Relation” (33).¹

Nathanial’s job at the port, where he faces a sea that laps in and out, is therefore no accident as the site where he most intensely experiences globality. The sea unifies, diffracts, and connects, making the experience of insularity for Glissant not a turning away from the world and its history, but instead an opportunity to comprehend its interconnectedness. In Nathanial’s job, language, and connection to place – especially the sea, to which the narrative rhythmically returns and returns – he enacts an understated daily resistance to the globalising forces that suck Caribbean people like him from periphery to centre. From this position, he also recognises the sinister patterns laid down in “*O [...] fe opportunity*” (182; italics in original). The Windrush ship carrying post-war migrants “[u]sed-a be banana boat” and still travels the same routes on that sea, “[o]nly now it exportin de people” (183). Nathanial understands that official names and contemporary uses of the Windrush ships are superficial in the larger scheme: “It nyah matter, de cargo’s still a-gobble up abroad by foreigner – still peel back te flesh on arrival an swallow whole. Nevah te be seen again” (183).

Linking the migration of human bodies with the flow of the region’s consumable items (bananas, rum, sugar, tobacco, coffee) – as well as evoking slave ships transporting Black people to their fates, never to be seen again – Nathanial flips one of the region’s foundational, colonial myths by suggesting that it is Europeans, not Caribbean peoples, who are the cannibals, “consuming the Caribbean” (Sheller). As Mimi Sheller has masterfully demonstrated, “Western European and North American publics have unceasingly consumed the natural environment, commodities, human bodies, and cultures of the Caribbean over the last five hundred years,” in various yet interlocking ways (3). Nathanial knows this. “Big Islan” not only continually draws attention to how globalisation and imperialism reach into the lives of colonised subjects at home, but repeatedly reframes the narratives created by these forces about the “natural” world order. As Glissant knew, this thrust in Western thought imposes systematized, linear, and unified narratives of place and history which, clustered around the notion of the “One” – God, language, nation – again erase the multiplicity and specifics of Caribbean experience (*Poetics* 47-49).

In this way maps, which like language are a tenant of colonial education and mastery, offer another ambivalent and critical framing device in Clarke’s counternarrative. The story’s title “Big Islan,” which plays on the title of Andrea Levy’s critically acclaimed novel *Small Island* (2004), prompts readers to question what it means to have an island mentality, big or small. Looking at the world map as part of his education, Nathanial is shocked to discover how geographically insignificant Jamaica appears, a “tiny-small speck in de middle ov de

world” (180–81). Even stranger, however, is the size of the imperial power that dominates it; England is also physically “teeny,” and yet its cannibalising reach is immense (182). Mapping the world in order to apprehend it, which like naming reality is so often used as a colonial tool of domination, in this case allows Nathaniel new means to critique colonialism itself: “Likkle place like dat rapin an pillagin de whole rest-a de world. It a madness unheard ov” (182). By resisting the belief that he is “crazy” for wanting to stay in Jamaica, Nathaniel is able to identify and challenge the colonial “madness” that orders the world around itself and calls it rational, right and inevitable.

Only those who can conceive of themselves as the centre – who have not only constructed the globe around their position, but also value unified centrality above all – can afford to be ignorant of “de globality ov it all” (Clarke 181). Like Clarke’s story, *Small Island* critically explores the relationship between insularity, geographic size and geopolitical impact. In Levy’s novel, Gilbert Joseph, a Jamaican who defended the British empire as part of the armed forces in World War Two, says he used to regard other West Indians as “small islanders’ whose universe only runs a few miles in either direction before it falls into the sea” (110). But returning home after travelling and living in Britain he is shocked to realise: “man, we Jamaicans are all small islanders too!” (163). The double-edge of Levy’s title is ultimately exposed when Gilbert and his wife Hortense migrate to Britain as part of the Windrush generation. Both have spent a lifetime learning about the Mother Country and could find England on a map with their eyes closed (118–19). Yet in England they are continually asked if Jamaica is in Africa.

Facing the ignorance, racism and discrimination of English people who cannot even place Jamaica on a map, Levy’s novel suggests that it is the inhabitants of *this* small island, not Caribbean people, whose horizons limit them. Pulled into the global currents that shape life at home in the Caribbean, living globality is both a survival strategy and a response to their reality, as is understanding identity not merely in itself but in relation to others (Glissant *Poetics* 89).² Like Nathaniel Robinson in “Big Islan,” these colonial subjects innately live their precariousness in the world order as “specks on a map” in the Caribbean archipelago. Glissant, who begins his *Caribbean Discourse* (1981) with an epigraph attributed to a dismissive Charles de Gaulle on visiting Martinique – “Between Europe and America I see only specks of dust” – throughout his work signals that this precariousness can be an advantage. In contradiction to the term’s common usage, *insularity* in the Caribbean geographical sense can promote a broader consciousness and interconnectedness.

Yet the definition of the Caribbean as a geographic space is itself complex. Sheller highlights the slipperiness of defining the Caribbean – is it a grouping of islands? Cultures that share a plantation past? – in order to instead expose the role of imagination and fantasy, especially as a paradise and playground for U.S. and European publics, in creating what is understood as “the Caribbean” (5-6). “This work of imagination,” she writes, “has powerfully shaped transatlantic cultures

over the past five hundred years, and has shaped the Caribbean in a high-stakes game of making and remaking of places, cultures, bodies, and natures” (6). What interests me in this article is, in part, the ways “Big Islan” reappropriates this work of imagining so often directed *at* the Caribbean, in order to make and remake places and maps *from* the Caribbean. As Angelique V. Nixon writes, building on Sheller, global inequalities are sustained “through not only neocolonialism and global capitalism, but also through representation” (9). “Big Islan” reimagines and re-presents “the Caribbean” by reordering, reframing and extending horizons, unexpectedly grouping Australia, along with England and Jamaica, in the story’s archipelago of islands.

Beating Them at their Own Game: Cricket and the Calypso Summer Test Series

The surprising introduction of Australia into a story about Jamaicans in Kingston furthers Clarke’s critique in innovative ways, and creates a significant shift in the narrative. At home in his Kingston kitchen, Nathaniel sees photos in the *Gleaner* newspaper, of the West Indian cricket team touring Australia: playing, relaxing on a beach, and being feted by adoring Australian fans – especially crowds of white women with “mout so wide open Nathaniel tink im can si dem tonsil vibratin. One-a de girl [...] lookin like she gwan faint” (187). Or, as Clarise summarises in her typically humorous, understated terms: “Seem dem getting a likkle famous ovah dere” (187). Textual markers suggest that these images refer to the historical cricket test series that took place in the Australian summer of 1960-61, and came to be known as the “Calypso Summer” test (Tyner).

This historical moment and setting, charged with racial and nationalist politics – as well as the glimmer of new, decolonial possibilities – offers a potent temporal anchor for Clarke’s story. The test series was significant, not only for cricket-lovers, but for Caribbean self-determination: it was the first time a Black man, Frank Worrell, led the side as captain, symbolising a momentous shift in power in the region.³ As C.L.R. James writes in *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), which documents his own active role in this campaign for change, “Frank Worrell and his team in Australia [...] added a new dimension to cricket history” (257). But even more significantly, for a people “in the full tide of the transition from colonialism to independence,” it also added dimensions to *world* history that reached far beyond the boundaries of the cricket pitch (232). The continued selection of white captains had resulted in humiliation on the world stage, by perpetuating the paternalistic English perception that, “Yes, [the Black men] are fine players, but, funny, isn’t it, they cannot be responsible for themselves – they must always have a white man to lead them” (233).

In Australia, led by a Black man for the first time, the West Indies cricketers were not only responsible for themselves but wildly popular, meeting with the then-Prime Minister Robert Menzies – “shakin hand

wid a grey-hair man in fancy suit” (Clarke 189) – and at the end of the tour receiving a ticker-tape parade through the streets of Melbourne. “Big Islan” conveys the glamour of these images. Nathaniel is filled with envy – and with wonder: “‘Wat country dis, dat offah such reception te black West Indian man. Treat us like we kings!’ im whisper citedly te imself” (189). Newfound curiosity prompts him to locate Australia on the map, which holds more surprises. “Big, big islan,” Clarise informs him: “Dem seh de whole Caribbean can fit inside one tiny likkle piece ov de country. Islan so big it also a continent” (188). In making this link, between two islands bonded by their love of an English game, the story invites its readers to consider how else these dots on the colonial map converge – or diverge – in their relationship to one another, and to the “Mother Country.”

In 1962, less than one year after the West Indies toured Australia, Jamaica officially gained independence from Britain: another historical event alluded to in “Big Islan” (186–87). More than a mere physical pastime, cricket played a crucial role before, during and after West Indian independence, forging Caribbean belonging and pride, at least in the English-speaking regions. In the decades that followed the Calypso Summer test, the West Indian team came to dominate world cricket. In Stevan Riley’s documentary *Fire in Babylon* (2010), former West Indies cricketers recall the successes of the 1970s and 1980s, and how this success served as an unprecedented source of regional pride, inspiration, and unity, deeply entwined with the explosion of Caribbean culture that made Bob Marley a global icon.⁴ Particularly striking are the words of fast bowler Andy Roberts, which evoke – but flip – Nathaniel’s observations of the globe. “Here we are,” he recalls thinking at the peak of the West Indies’ success, “several dots on the map, dominating the world” (Riley). For Glissant, the Caribbean reality as dots or “specks of dust” is “essential to grasping the nature of global space” (672). In a sporting sense, this “precarious insularity” (Dash 672) means taking nothing for granted and gave the West Indies an edge. Cricket, like the English language, seems in “Big Islan” to offer a means to appropriate and reinvent a colonial institution, to upend the global order; to beat them at their own game.

Yet true to the irony and ambivalence of Clarke’s writing, cricket does not represent a simple, feel-good means to upending colonial structures in global relations. Instead, the decolonising potential of cricket here is powerful precisely because it exposes colonial structures still in place. The immense popular support for the West Indies team in Australia highlights the hypocrisy and racism of the nation which receives them; blinded by its own colonised desire for whiteness, Australia celebrates these visiting Black men and makes them visible while, as I examine below, legally and physically erasing people of colour from the official narrative of national belonging at home. In spotlighting the significance of cricket for West Indians in countering colonialism and racism, Clarke prompts readers to question if and whether this political change reaches beyond the boundaries/horizons of one island to connect to another.

Imagining Beyond Colonial Horizons

The story asks readers whether they are willing to make this connection: to explore horizons, chart connections and merge boundaries that usually delineate small islands (the Caribbean) and big islands (Australia) as having nothing to do with each other. Nathaniel declares that the letter A “is nat gwan be jus fe ackee anymore” – it has taken on new importance: “*A is fe Owstrayleah*” (188; italics in original). Yet just as *E is fe Ingran* reveals a dissonance between standard language and Caribbean reality, the gap between “A” and “O” in *A is fe Owstrayleah* captures the distance between Nathaniel’s expectation and the historical reality. This gap is the element, I suggest, which Clarke’s text invites its readers to fill.

Readers are nudged by the optimism of Nathaniel’s words to consider the actual historical context in which the story is set. Comparing Australia directly with apartheid-era South Africa, Nathaniel surmises that Australia “nat givin an owl-hoot wat colour skin ye gat wen ye turn up, like dem gat nat a care in de world bout trivialities like dat” (190). However, readers – especially Australian readers – may be aware that until 1973 the White Australia Policy still refused migrants like Nathaniel precisely on the basis of their skin colour (Department of Home Affairs). Australian concern with “trivialities” like skin colour hides in plain sight, enshrined in law. Thus, through the irony of his belief in Australia as a post-racial utopia, and the gap between what readers likely know and Nathaniel guesses, the comparison to South Africa exposes the link between apartheid and Australia’s immigration policies of the time, as part of a continuum of racist nationalism.

In fact, Nathaniel’s words contain a deeper irony that exposes Australia’s unique colonial history. Far from being a nation where Black men are treated as “kings” (189) – that is, as sovereign rulers – Australia’s colonisation was founded on the legal concept of *terra nullius*: an unclaimed land of nothing and nobody (Banivanua-Mar and Edmonds 7). The conceptual violence of *terra nullius* simultaneously obscures the material violence that it engenders, by erasing the Black and Brown bodies of First Nations peoples from law and official history, even before they are physically destroyed through systematic genocide. As Jamaica Kincaid writes of Columbus encountering “new lands whose existence he had never even heard of before, and then finding in these new lands people and their things [...] he empties the land of these people, and then he empties the people, he just empties the people” (3). Naming, claiming, destroying, emptying, and then starting “anew”: the blank slate is key in Australia’s fantasy of its own white foundations, enshrined in the official policy of “White Australia” which, like *terra nullius*, is a fallacious and thus ever-more anxiously-defended concept.

What does it matter, then, that Australia is geographically a *big* island? Through the uncommon lens of Jamaica, the story interrogates how the very insularity that has shaped – and continues to shape –

Australia's racist policies allows it to forget that it, too, is "small" – another colonial outpost.⁵ In contrast to the insularity that Glissant says orients Caribbean nations outwards, Australia seems to turn further in. Furthermore, unlike Jamaica, Australia has never realised its independence from Britain and its monarchy; in 1999 the country even voted in a referendum against becoming a republic (Jones). Beyond size, the suggestion that Australia is a "[c]ountry bigger dan *J is fe Jamaica* an *E is fe Ingran* all roll up together" thus speaks to a deeper truth about the particularities of colonialism in a settler society (188; italics in original). Australia's mix of British cultural and white racial supremacy is "rolled up" in the familiar anxieties of a periphery which gazes longingly to the centre, manifesting as the infamous "Australian Cultural Cringe" (Phillips). This story's subversive framing gazes at one fringe from another, and in doing so weaves a link that is not often seen or heard in narratives about Australian belonging – or "unbelonging," as Clarke writes in her memoir (*The Hate Race* 55).

Through this perspective and structure, "Big Islan" and the collection *Foreign Soil* more broadly together challenge what Ghassan Hage calls the "managerial attitude" of white Australians to national belonging (46). This raw sentiment is exposed in the 2001 election speech of former conservative Prime Minister John Howard, who stirred up racial hatred and campaigned on an anti-asylum seeker platform, (in)famously declaring that "we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come" (Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House). Yet in public debates over immigration, as Hage and other scholars have noted, liberal discourses of multiculturalism, just as much as nationalist, anti-immigrant ideologies, continue to position white Australians as governors of a national space in which "Third World-looking" people are a problem to be managed (Hage 233). With protagonists who are mainly Black and Brown, *Foreign Soil* does not position identity in relation to whiteness within the space of the text – although, as I will examine, it invites readers to question how whiteness shapes the horizons of racialized and colonised subjects.

Hage observes that as the object of immigration debates in Australia, the term "migrant" slips easily between two categories, meaning both those who have already migrated, and those yet to leave home (242). In "Big Islan," the outcome of the story (do they stay or do they go) is left unresolved. Instead, Clarke digs into Hage's second category, asking what it means to be a migrant before you have left home; to not only lose those around you – the young people hurrying to leave, like Nathaniel's brother, Curtis – but to lose the home around you, even before you move. Significantly, the newspaper stories about cricket manage to more completely fulfil the process of dislocation for Nathaniel that learning English only begins. His newfound interest in the big island-continent resizes the home where he has previously been so happy. In the wake of the *Gleaner* reports, "somehow, someway, fe some reason, wen Nathaniel Robinson gazes ovah de city im grow te love so-so dear, Kingston feel insignificant small. *R. R is fe restlessness*" (191).

Closing on these words, the story continues its commitment to ambivalence. On one hand, there is tragedy in seeing Nathaniel's defiant love of home finally eroded, especially if readers understand the futility of a Black man setting sights on Australia, within the story's political and historical context. Yet on the other hand, this very irony once again gives Nathaniel the last word. The story does not crush Nathaniel's germinating, though historically impossible, interest in migrating to Australia. Though the White Australia Policy probably would have prevented this in 1961, "Big Islan" allows him the space to consider a different possibility, beyond the horizons of colonial and nationalist maps. In doing so the story defies the managerial fantasies of white Australians, by putting Nathaniel in charge of his relationship with national space (Jamaican and/or Australian). In charge of who he is and where he goes – or stays – Nathaniel is an imagining subject rather than merely a problematic, "Third World-looking" object (Hage 18) or an "eternal victim" of essentialised stereotypes (Fanon 18).

Furthermore, in what it leaves out, the story places the onus on readers to draw connections between the text and its context, inviting active participation in the "total expression" of story-telling (Brathwaite 312). Brathwaite explains that in oral traditions an audience is required to complete the circle of the narrative (312). It is worth noting that not every reader will be aware of the historical context surrounding the events in "Big Islan" that I draw attention to in this article. However, by placing so many specific details and historical allusions in the text – the migration of the Windrush generation, Jamaican independence, cricket in Australia, South African apartheid – Clarke tempts readers to learn more, to map the connections between these apparently disparate but in fact deeply connected histories and places. With its humorous tone, lively personalities, and distinctive language play, "Big Islan" stands alone as a story that entertains even as it alludes to darker elements. But the story becomes much more if its readers accept the invitation of total expression, to participate, question, and learn as the story unfolds.

Contrary to the dominant white version of Australian history and migration, as well as other nationalisms and multiculturalisms in the Global North, there are Caribbean diasporic stories to be recovered in Australia. Indeed, that Clarke's story "Big Islan" was written at all already challenges the erasure of these narratives, as it directly results from the migration of her family to Australia in the 1970s. In her memoir, *The Hate Race* (2016), Clarke documents this journey, from the African continent to the Caribbean, and finally to the big island-continent: Jamaica, Guyana, Britain, Australia. Conjuring, again, that ever-important sea, she writes that the "watery tracks of my family's unbelonging scar this great, green globe like keloid geography" (*The Hate Race* 55). Yet while the sea isolates and insulates, it also connects islands to islands, archipelagos to continents (Laughlin 9). By pursuing these connections Clarke imagines a literary archipelago in which "Big Islan," though small in size, represents a significant counternarrative. Her story's "pedagogical imperative" is not to give a lesson in history, but to give history new context.

Notes

1. The deep meaning of place to Nathaniel in “Big Islan,” and the representation of this place through creolised language, connects the story to its Caribbean literary traditions, as well as postcolonial literature more broadly. In *Caribbean Discourse* Glissant stresses the function of landscape as fundamental to the literary innovations of the New World: “The relationship with the land, one that is even more threatened because the community is alienated from the land, becomes so fundamental in this discourse that landscape in the work stops being merely decorative or supportive and emerges as a full character. Describing the landscape is not enough. The individual, the community, the land are inextricable in the process of creating history. Landscape is a character in this process. Its deepest meanings need to be understood” (105-106).

2. For Glissant, to “*live globality*” is to be “on the point of truly combating the inequities of globalization,” Bongie explains; however, Bongie also points out that the Martinican thinker is characteristically vague on the practical execution or implications of this concept (Bongie 93; emphasis in original). This article aims to demonstrate the embodied and daily ways that Nathaniel lives out this concept, far from theoretical debates.

3. Though “Big Islan” does refer to Worrell, it states that Wesley Hall is the captain of the team, which is not accurate historically (189).

4. As Sheller points out, via Paul Gilroy, Bob Marley’s status as a “planetary figure” is also complicated and ambivalent: even though he has been commodified and consumed across the globe, something remains that exceeds this consumption (180-1). Sheller’s broader argument supports this idea of resistance, reminding us that “[h]owever much the Caribbean is repeatedly invented, consumed, and eaten, it is never eaten up” (201).

5. In her brilliant *Australia and the Insular Imagination* (2009), Suvendrini Perera argues that the ocean, not the land, defines Australian nationalism, and that its most urgent battles over identity and statehood play out on its beaches and coastlines. Island-ness forms this nationalist imaginary and is simultaneously a product of it, with Australia using the island state to rework past and present “in its self-image as an island fortress and outpost of western civilization; in its colonizing relations towards indigenous peoples throughout the region; and in its status as a local surrogate for the larger imperial powers” (8).

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